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STUDY RAISES CONCERNS ABOUT FLU RISK FOR CHILDREN

(RICHMOND, Va.)— Public health officials are increasingly concerned about the vulnerability of young children to the flu this year following research that shows that mothers are unaware of a new recommendation from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that adds all children between the ages of 5 and 18 years to the population that should be immunized against the flu.

“Children are most at risk for catching the flu and most at risk for spreading it for the same reason. They are in highly social settings at school and with friends on a nearly constant basis,” said Karen Remley, M.D., MBA, Virginia’s Health Commissioner. “Due to the change in the CDC recommendation this year to include children between 5 and 18 years of age, many parents may not be aware of the importance of having school-age children vaccinated. Studies have shown, however, that receiving a flu shot is the most effective preventive measure one can take against the flu.”

A CDC survey revealed that 41 percent of mothers with children in day care do not know that beginning at six months of age, children should receive a flu shot. Mothers said the primary reason they were unaware of the recommendation was that their doctors did not inform them about the vaccination. Infants and young children are among those most likely to be hospitalized or die from influenza or from its complications.

Robert Gunther, M.D., MPH, President of the Virginia Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, said that flu shots are available in nearly all pediatric offices and that many offices have expanded their hours or made other accommodations to increase the availability of the vaccine. “The influenza vaccine significantly decreases the risk of infants and young children winding up in an emergency room or the hospital with flu related illness. School age children also can benefit from spending more time in school ready to learn,” Dr. Gunther said.

Influenza is a highly contagious virus that is easily spread from person to person, especially when an infected individual coughs or sneezes. It usually comes on suddenly. Symptoms can include high fever, chills, headaches, exhaustion, sore throat, cough and all-over body aches. “Some people say, it feels like they’ve been hit by a truck,” said Jim Farrell, director of the Division of Immunization at the Virginia Department of Health. Symptoms can also be mild.

The virus can be transmitted 24 hours before influenza symptoms appear and for 5 days or longer after an infected person becomes sick. **That means that you may be able to pass on the flu to someone before you know you are sick, as well as while you are sick.** “Infants or young children, older adults or people with medical conditions such as heart or lung disease, as well as those who care for persons in those groups, should get a flu shot,” stressed Farrell. “They are at increased risk of serious complications and by protecting yourself against the flu you also help protect the ones you care for.”

In addition to getting a flu shot each year, good health habits can help prevent influenza. These include coughing into your sleeve or covering your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing; washing your hands often to help protect yourself from germs; avoiding touching your eyes, nose or mouth; staying home from work, school, and errands when you are sick; and avoiding close contact with people who are sick.

VDH and the CDC recognize Dec. 8-14, 2008, as National Influenza Vaccination Week. Each year more than 200,000 Americans are hospitalized from flu and its complications and 36,000 die. Combined with pneumonia, influenza is the seventh leading cause of death in the nation. January and February are typically peak flu months in Virginia. “It’s not too late to protect yourself and your family this season,” Dr. Remley said. “We urge those who have not yet been vaccinated against influenza to do so now.”

For additional information on influenza and a complete list of populations recommended to receive the flu shot visit www.vdh.virginia.gov/epidemiology/immunization/. To view the entire survey, *Fighting Flu in Child Care Settings*, visit www.familiesfightingflu.org/media/flumaterials.aspx.

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